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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000041

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LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIANS ANGRY BUT ORDERLY OVER GAZA

REF: A. TUNIS 27
 [1](#)B. TUNIS 14
 [1](#)C. TUNIS 10
 [1](#)D. TUNIS 2
 [1](#)E. 08 TUNIS 1256

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Tunisian protests about the situation in Gaza continue daily, including one in front of the US Embassy on January 16. The protests, which have varied in size and scale, have not generally been anti-American in focus. One opposition party has met with the Ambassador to discuss its concerns, and there are rumors that other groups will follow. There is also some discontent about the GOT's decision not to attend the Doha Summit, which led to a call for the GOT to "act in harmony with the population." End Summary.

Opposition Party Meets With Ambassador

[1](#)2. (C) On January 16, a delegation from the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) visited the Ambassador. The PDP contingent consisted of Secretary General Maya Jribi, former Secretary General and PDP Presidential Candidate Nejib Chebbi, and Arabic-weekly al-Mowqif Editor-in-Chief Rachid Khachana. The delegation began by saying that the issue of Gaza is important to the Tunisian people. They added that they hoped the United States would use its influence, especially its role on the United Nations Security Council, to press both sides to agree to a cease-fire agreement. Chebbi opined that in addition to a ceasefire, the embargo on Gaza must be lifted to create a social and economic climate essential to a durable peace agreement. Khachana added that he believed Arab countries would recognize Israel once critical issues such as the question of displaced Palestinian refugees is addressed.

[1](#)3. (C) The Ambassador responded that the United States is very concerned with the humanitarian situation in Gaza. He noted the US contributions to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), emphasizing that we are in constant contact with Egypt, Israel, and international organizations on humanitarian priorities. He also stressed the importance of all parties protecting innocent lives. The Ambassador made clear that the United States supported diplomatic solutions, and was seeking a durable and sustainable ceasefire, noting Secretary Rice's efforts and USG support for President Mubarek's initiatives. He also noted that Hamas must stop its rocket attacks. Thus far, the PDP is the only group to have requested a meeting with the Ambassador, but there are rumors that other groups will soon do the same.

Tunisians Still Taking to the Streets

¶4. (SBU) Demonstrations varying in scale protesting the situation in Gaza continue to take place every day. Eight women with signs protested briefly outside the American Embassy on January 16. The women, members of the Tunisian Women for Research on Development (AFTURD), said that they wished to make a non-violent public statement against the situation in Gaza, and were allowed to peacefully march near the Embassy's main entrance and to hand a petition to Poloff.

Their petition called for the embargo on Gaza to be lifted, asked that Arab governments aid the Palestinian people, and advocated for the United Nations Security Council to protect Palestine. On January 14, Tunisian university students, teachers and staff (including the staff of the Faculty of Law and Political Science and the Faculty of Economics) held a demonstration on campus. Tunisian lawyers protested across from the Palais de Justice on January 15.

¶5. (C) Several larger demonstrations have taken place or are planned. On January 16, there was a peaceful march of roughly 50 women held near the UN offices in downtown Tunis (security forces didn't allow the group to reach the UN offices themselves). A journalist told the Embassy that the GOT had given approval for another demonstration on January

¶17. The latter protest is being organized by the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), AFTURD, the National Union for Tunisian Journalists (SNJT), and Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD). One Embassy contact opined that independent civil society groups, like the LTDH and ATFD,

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felt the January 1 Gaza demonstration was co-opted by the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD). Thus, the January 16 event represents their attempt to hold an independent demonstration.

¶6. (C) Likewise, the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) has been refusing to join demonstrations organized by the GOT, instead participating in protests organized by the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and independent NGOs. The UGTT is organizing a protest for January 17 that will take place following the protest by the LTDH, ATFD, SNJT, and AFTURD that same day. On January 19, another joint demonstration is being planned by the PDP, the opposition at-Tajdid (Renewal) Party, and the opposition Democratic Forum for Freedom and Labor (FDTL) party.

GOT Sends Medical Unit to Gaza?

¶7. (C) According to the private Arabic-weekly al-Akhbar al-Joumhouriya, the GOT is sending a team of 35 doctors and nurses to Gaza the week of January 18. This supplements the other humanitarian assistance the GOT has sent to Egypt for delivery to the people of Gaza, reported Refs B, C, and D. Domestic press also reports that President Ben Ali discussed the Gaza issue with the visiting Iranian Vice President and Special Envoy Mohamed Reza Rahimi on January 13 (septel). On January 15, the RCD's Secretary General released a statement expressing the Tunisian people's concern over the situation in Gaza and pledging to support the Palestinian's right to freedom and an independent state.

GOT Decision Criticized

¶8. (C) Some segments of the Tunisian population have expressed displeasure with the GOT's decision not to attend the Arab League's Extraordinary Summit in Doha on January 16 (Ref A). For example, 40 lawyers circulated a petition following the announcement expressing their rejection of the

GOT's Doha boycott and calling on GOT to reconsider and "act in harmony with the population." The GOT announcement that it had canceled its annual gathering for the diplomatic corps to present New Year's greetings to President Ben Ali gave rise to speculation about President Ben Ali's health. A subsequent diplomatic note from the Libyan Embassy, whose Ambassador serves as dean of the diplomatic corps, said that the gathering had been called off "because of objective reasons related to the current situation in the region."

Godec